

Fort Matanzas

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Fort Matanzas National Monument



The Native Peoples of Florida

The Earliest People

When people think of Indians in Florida, most people think of Seminoles. Yet the Seminoles are relatively newcomers to Florida. Even Europeans had been here for over 200 years before the first Seminoles came down from Georgia in the 1700s.

But that does not mean that the land was unpeopled until then. About 12,000 years ago, when Florida was much larger and drier than now, wandering hunter-gatherers arrived.

They lived a simple life, following the great herds of mammoths and other mega-fauna and gathering the wild grains, nuts, and berries they found in their seasonal wanderings.

They made no pottery, used no bows and arrows. Instead they hunted with spears and cooked in leather bags with the contents heated with hot stones.

No one knows what these people called themselves, but to archaeologists, they are known as *Paleo-Indians*, the oldest Indians.

Archaic Period Orange Culture 4000-1000 BC

(Dates are approximate)

Around 4000 BC, as more of the icecaps melted, the land became more like the Florida of today—wetter with extensive salt marshes along the coasts.

New technologies entered the lives of the people. It was found that spears could be thrown farther and with more power and accuracy with the use of an *atlatl*, a stick that was fitted into the shaft of a spear. Perhaps this technology contributed to the disappearance of the large game animals about this same time.

As the large prey died out, these people began to exploit the vast water resources. Fish, shellfish, turtles, and alligators became a major part of their diet. Hollowed out log canoes enabled them to travel the many rivers.

Another technology was the invention of pottery. It was a soft, porous pottery with an orange color, hence the name “Orange Period”. This pottery was tempered with Spanish moss that burned away as the pottery was fired.

Woodland Period Regional Cultures 1000 BC – 1500 AD

(Dates are approximate)

About 2500 years ago, as the various groups of archaic people began to become more settled in one place, each group began to develop a distinct regional culture while maintaining several customs in common.

All of these cultures celebrated the Black Drink Ceremony. They produced artwork as evidenced by carved masks and animal images and incised designs on shells and copper plates worn as jewelry. The evidence of grave goods in burials suggests a belief in an afterlife.

They began to use traps and bows and arrows. The people who settled in the rich hills near present-day Tallahassee even began agriculture, growing a small-eared corn. Specialized tools, such as awls, drills, knives, and needles were made of bone or shell.

Their pottery also changed. Sand was used as a temper, and the pots were made by coils that were smoothed instead of forming a pot from a single glob of clay. They also began to decorate their pottery with stamped and incised designs with each group or village having its favorite motifs.

Caloosa

By the time the Europeans arrived in the early 1500s, the regional cultures were well established and differentiated. The group living along the Caloosahatchie River and the coast south of Tampa Bay became known as the *Caloosa*. They were a powerful, fierce people who exacted tribute from less powerful groups in the region.

The archaeological site at Marco Island, south of Naples, FL, shows a typical village with built up shell islands connected by canals. Beautifully painted and carved wooden masks were found at this site.

They had a well-established religion and practiced human sacrifice. Temples were built on mounds. They believed that people had three souls—in one’s eye, one’s shadow, and one’s reflection in water.

Some people believe that the Caloosa traveled to Cuba in their canoes and may even have traded with the Mayan of the Yucatan. There is evidence that they had had experience with Europeans before Juan Ponce de Leon arrived in 1513. The Spanish were never able to missionize them as they did with the other Florida natives.

Apalachee

The *Apalachee* lived in the uplands of the panhandle and north central Florida. The soil was good there, and the Apalachee developed agriculture and extensive trade networks. This group's territory was so extensive at one time that the Appalachian Mountains were named after them.

This group played a type of ball game with up to 50 men on a team. So rough was this game that it was known as "the Little Brother of War". Besides providing a social gathering in which news could

be exchanged and young people find mates, the ball game kept the men fit for battle and also eased tensions and arguments between villages.

The Apalachee were thoroughly missionized by the Spanish. San Luis Mission, a state historical site in Tallahassee, is a good example of an Apalachee-Spanish mission with a reconstructed church and priests' house on one side of the central plaza and the tribal council house and Chief's house on the other side. The council house could hold several thousand people.

Timucuan



The people who lived along the St. Johns River in east-central and northeast Florida were known as the *Timucuan*. Although the various villages were often at war with each other, they were peaceful towards the Europeans. Chief Seloy offered Pedro Menéndez the use of his council house as a shelter when the Spanish first arrived at St. Augustine.

The Timucua were a tall, stately people, although probably not 7 feet tall as reported, although skeletons up to 6 ½ feet have been found. The Timucua, especially those of higher status, decorated themselves with tattoos.

The artist Jacques LeMoyne, who was a member of the French Fort Caroline colony, made several drawings of the everyday life of these Indians. We are fortunate that he was among the few to escape back to France, and so his priceless drawings were saved, and we are able to have some idea of the food and customs of the Timucuan.

In addition to these groups there were other, less powerful natives in Florida at the time of contact. The *Ais* lived south of the Timucuan in the area of present-day Cape Canaveral. The *Tequesta*, known as the "sharkeaters", lived along the southeast coast in the region of present-day

Seminole

Then, who were the Seminoles, and how did they get to Florida?

By 1763, when Florida was turned over to the British by treaty, there were almost no Florida natives left. The last Timucuans moved to Cuba with the Spanish population when they left. Others had all died out from European diseases or were killed or captured by Indians armed by the British to the north.

By 1800, as more whites began to populate the interiors of Georgia and Alabama, there were conflicts with the Indians over the best farmland. In order to keep the peace, Andrew Jackson led the U.S. army against these Indians in 1817-1818, pushing many of them into Spanish Florida. Because these Indians had lived along rivers and streams, they were known as Creeks, but the Spanish called them *Cimarones*, or "wild ones". Eventually, this word changed to *Seminole*.

After 1821 when it became a US territory, Florida was no longer a safe haven for the Seminoles.

Besides, many African slaves had run away from the plantations in Georgia and the Carolinas and found refuge with the Seminoles. Their masters wanted them back.

In 1830 the Indian Removal Act was passed. Many of the Seminoles surrendered and were sent to a reservation in Oklahoma. Others, including Osceola, continued to fight for a bit of land to call their own.

The 2nd Seminole War lasted from 1835-42. Many of the Seminoles were pushed farther into the Florida swamps, but many still refused to surrender. 1855-58 saw the 3rd Seminole War.

About 300 Seminoles finally found refuge in the wilds of south Florida where their descendants still live in and around the Everglades, never having signed a treaty with the white man who tried to force them from the land. These three Seminole wars were the longest and most expensive that the government would wage against the native people of America.